

Dear Constituent

As we approach the next phase of the pandemic response where all businesses and services are allowed to re-open subject to social distancing rules, I thought I should write to you about where we have reached in handling the crisis. I will start today by looking at the response to the virus itself.

During the last six months I have pressed Ministers to work with doctors and scientists on a better set of treatments for serious cases of the virus. MPs without medical qualifications of course do not offer medical advice, but it is the job of Ministers to ask the profession for results and evidence about what might work. The early response to rely on oxygen, escalating to patients being placed on ventilators left us with a high death rate amongst serious cases. Ministers and advisers have been pressing for controlled trials of a range of therapies. So far this has resulted in the adoption of an anti viral drug which has reduced the time people suffer from the illness and helped recovery in a significant minority of patients. It has led to the approval of a steroid to deal with those patients that have extreme and damaging immune reactions to the virus. It has also led to some doctors considering blood clot busting drugs where there is evidence of clots on the lungs impeding the passage of oxygen into the bloodstream. There are other treatments which are proposed around the world which await conclusive evaluation here by the NHS. This is important, as we all wish to see the death rate down and suffering reduced.

I have taken up the issue of the spread of the disease in hospitals and care homes. Ministers have set policy to avoid the early release of CV 19 patients from hospital into care homes where they might spread the disease. They have also assured me the NHS is imposing strict standards of infection control, and seeking to isolate CV 19 patients and their treatment from other patients and procedures in General Hospitals. This is important not only to cut the spread of the virus, but also to reassure other users of the NHS hospital services that they are not at risk through attending a District General Hospital. My preferred solution of using the new Nightingale hospitals for CV 19 cases, leaving the General hospitals CV 19 free was not adopted, despite the obvious success in creating that substantial extra capacity quickly near the peak of the outbreak.

I have throughout sought to get from the government more accurate, consistent and reliable numerical data about cases of the disease and death rates from the disease. These are crucial to assessing the so called R rate or pace of spread of the virus, and to seeing how successful the NHS is at treating cases and bringing down the death rate as we all wish. Even in the last few days there have been changes to the figures for the number of deaths, as it has emerged again that past published figures were probably overstating the totals. The latest realignment puts the English figures onto a more comparable basis with Scotland by only citing CV 19 where the patient had it within 28 days of death. It still leaves open judgements about whether someone died of CV 19 or died of something else whilst also having had CV 19. The government did decide to seek a more accurate take on the rate of spread

by sample testing the general population over time to see how the proportion with the virus varied. This was clearly a better way of judging it than trying to derive it from death rates which were based around changing and not entirely reliable numbers.

As we go forward I trust Ministers will press for more accuracy in data about incidence of the disease and death rates. They need to ensure decisions about local lock downs are well based, and to contain further outbreaks by a good test and trace system. As the Prime Minister has stated, we cannot afford another general lock down and must find other ways of countering the virus whilst allowing business and social life to revive.

Yours sincerely

Borrowing and printing money

When the government decided on a lock down of the economy which was bound to produce the biggest fall in output and incomes any of us had seen, I argued that the government did need to take big and quick action to offset the worst consequences of the collapse in activity.

I argued here and elsewhere for generous furlough and income support schemes for those who were prevented from working by laws and guidance. I supported the idea of a big surge in public borrowing , and a further programme of Quantitative easing to make sure the government could borrow a large sum at low interest rates. These policies were adopted, unemployment stayed low, and many people got through lock down with help from government support schemes.

I also argued that you can only do this once, for a few months. There is no magic money tree to pay millions of people wages for doing nothing. There is no magic money tree to pay any losses any nationalised activity like railways runs up, year after year. The more features of economic life the government controls and interferes with, the more likely we are to suffer shortages, falling productivity, and financial problems.

If we look at an extreme example of Magic Money tree thinking we turn to modern Venezuela. Their resort to excessive and continuous printing of money has given them a massive inflation and chronic shortages of basics, with a domestic currency that has little value to buy imports. This country with the world's largest oil reserves decided nationalising their golden goose would finance their governments wild excess. Instead under government control their output has slumped from a fairly poor 2.5 million barrels a day five years ago to a bare 400,000 barrels a day now. Their wells are run down or do not flow, and their oil transport system is in decay. Without the private sector to invest, produce and market they have almost lost their entire oil industry. The UK government understands western governments including itself need to stay well clear of such thinking and actions, as they wish to

maintain the relatively high living standards people have worked hard to achieve.

From here the government is right to say we need to get back to work and avoid any further general lock down. They are right to ask the NHS to offer a full range of services, treatments and consultations again now the CV 19 numbers are much reduced. They are right to say we need all the schools back this September. They also need to start to rein in public spending and therefore borrowing. I have set out some of the ways of doing this, and will talk of others in the days ahead. The way to run a prosperous country is to allow people and companies the freedoms to make choices and supply needs given the demand and technology available.

Let's see a plan for the nationalised railway

Trains travel largely empty. Losses must be colossal. The railway has all the costs of the pre CV19 era, with the turnover of the post CV 19 social distancing era. Ministers need to seek a new plan and tell us how they will make the railways more useful and less costly to taxpayers.

For a long time the railway has been effectively nationalised. Network Rail is completely state owned and heavily subsidised. The private sector train operating companies have to run a timetable laid down by government, under heavy regulations that leave little scope for innovation or service change. Rail pathways are strictly rationed. It is little wonder many of them struggle to survive as management has little scope to cut costs or boost revenues. Trying to get productivity and service improvements is very difficult. There is a long tradition of industrial action against management induced change.

The railway normally prevents choice for passengers and competition to reduce fares and raise quality of service. Rail operators respond to requirements imposed by Regulators. Their remuneration in part depends on targets, where it may make sense to game the rules. Quite often the train operator fails to provide a reliable on time service owing to failures of the nationalised network operator. The whole system has out of date signalling which limits the numbers of trains per hour. Monopoly providers seek to prevent new challengers competing.

Instead of building a very expensive new line, HS2, the railway should accelerate digital signalling to increase track capacity by around 25%. The railway needs to reconsider what sustainable travel patterns are likely in this new world and adjust services accordingly . It is difficult to see how passengers will be attracted back and better served without private capital and competition in service provision. The nationalised monopoly based model

we have been running for sometime is not delivering the services and quality we want. It is now sending unaffordable bills to taxpayers.

[On line visit to CLASP](#)

Yesterday I spent an hour talking to Wokingham's CLASP group. They raised a range of issues with me about the response to the virus, service for those with learning difficulties, use of public transport and the role of the Council. They asked me to tell them about the range of work and problems I deal with as local MP. I encouraged them to use this website. I would like to thank all involved in this charity for the work they do. I promised to take up a couple of matters for them on receipt of the details.

[Letter to the Education Secretary](#)

Dear Gavin

You were right to warn us that grade inflation can cause problems for universities allocating limited places to the best candidates. Grade inflation leads to demands for more discriminating higher grades, as with the introduction of the A* to offer some distinction between a large number of students who all came to qualify for an A grade.

It is important that next year the Examining Boards and Ofqual re establish a sound process for awarding grades to students that commands general confidence in the qualifications and allows universities to select the best students for the courses they offer. I am glad to hear that we will be returning to an exam based system. Awarding grades determined by the pupil's own teachers places the teachers in a difficult position of having to defend the grade, and leaves open the worry that some teachers take a more generous approach to their own students than others. An exam is professionally marked by teachers marking the work of other people's students, removing the chance of judgement being influenced by personal knowledge and relationship with the pupil. The grade arrived at is recognised as independent of the pupil's own teacher and school.

Next year the Examiners and the Boards will need to ask themselves how to pitch the standards and the grade boundaries. Should they return to something like the level of 2019, or should they incorporate the grade inflation of 2020? It is an important issue because it will send out a message about how the Examiners see standards. If the best universities and courses stay with

similar numbers of UK students between the two years it merely determines how high a grade any given pupil needs to achieve to get to the best institutions. If there are roughly the same total number of places grade inflation has an impact on grades needed to get a place at all.

There will also be questions to resolve over what to expect of A level candidates who lost some months of full time education in school this spring and summer. The Boards will also need to consider what impact if any complying with CV 19 guidance on social distancing will have on their education in the 2020-21 academic year. Will there be any adjustments to practicals, events in subjects like music and drama, foreign language conversations and other elements in some A level assessments? The Boards both need to be fair the class of 2021 and ensure that nonetheless they attain good standards that are comparable to other years.

One thing it should be possible to agree. Getting all exam year pupils back into school and offering them full teaching and good curriculum from here is essential for their education and for maintaining standards. I would appreciate details of your approach to the teaching and standards of exam for 2021.

Yours

John